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SUBJECT: SW CHINA CHRISTIANS: RELIGION AND CHARITABLE WORK IN
SICHUAN

REF: A) 09 Chengdu 289; B) Chengdu 16

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11. (U) This cable contains sensitive but unclassified
information - not for distribution on the internet.

12. (SBU) Summary: Pastor Richard Cai, the founder of Huamei, a
faith-based organization in Sichuan, recently provided an
overview of Protestant church groups and faith-based work in
Sichuan. Christian "meeting points" and house churches have
enjoyed strong growth, while approval to build new churches has
been difficult to obtain. With an emphasis on being "legal and
open," Huamei seeks primarily to be a social-services
organization that supports the government's social stability
goals, citing this approach as the most effective. He
characterized Chinese Christians in Sichuan as
disproportionately elderly, poor, uneducated, sick, and/or
female. In urban areas, young professionals tend to congregate
in unofficial "house churches," instead of formal churches and
meetings points. Sichuan Theological Seminary struggles to keep
pace with the growing demand for pastors in southwest China.
End Summary.

Explosive Growth of Meetings Points and House Churches

As Government Slows Recognition of Formal Churches

13. (SBU) In a January 5 meeting with Consul General, Richard
Cai, a second generation Chinese pastor who is also Vice
Chairman of the Sichuan Christian Council, discussed his
faith-based organization Huamei and broader religious issues in
China. After studying English at the University of Southern
Mississippi, Cai completed his master's degree at McMaster
Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and spent another year in
Canada as a pastor for the Windsor Chinese Alliance Church.
Upon returning to China in 2002, Cai went on to establish Huamei
in 2005, and also helped support the establishment of the
Chengdu Thanksgiving Church in 2007.

14. (SBU) Cai divided the structure of Chinese Protestant
congregations into three types:

A) Formal Churches:

Registered under the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and approved at the provincial level, these represent the largest and best organized of Chinese congregations in Sichuan. Obtaining approval, however, is no easy task. Churches must demonstrate that they have a proper building, land, and an approved leader; the Sichuan government has been reluctant to approve new churches. Protestant groups applied for eight churches to replace earthquake-damaged churches, and three entirely new churches. The RAB approved the eight replacement churches, but rejected the three new churches. Many of the approved "new" churches are, in reality, old churches that had been closed during the Cultural Revolution.

B) Registered Meeting Points:

Cai clarified the legal status of religious venues [zongjiao huodong suo] "meeting points" or "meeting places," which are legally recognized at the prefectural level, and distinct from illegal house churches (Ref A). These meetings points must be affiliated with a local church congregation that is already approved by the RAB. Since approval does not require a building or land, growth of meeting points has been rapid. As of year-end 2009, there were over 500 meetings points in Sichuan alone, almost double the number of five years ago. Growth in numbers of official churches has been slower. In 2009, Cai reported that Sichuan had about 140 official churches, up from about 100 five years earlier.

C) Unregistered House Churches:

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House churches are small, unregistered, and illegal gatherings of Christians that are tolerated or not depending upon their membership size and locality. Pastors of local churches are involved with some house churches, and they often become registered (and therefore legal) meeting points when they grow too large. There are also large networks of house churches that have sprung up which are not affiliated with any pastor or registered entity. Using English, Cai described some house churches are "cults." He mentioned "Eastern Lightning," a large movement in the Sichuanese countryside led by a woman who claims to be the second coming of Christ.

15. (SBU) Cai said there are no consistent criteria regarding the size of house churches in Sichuan. Typically in Sichuan, if a group reaches about 50 members, the government will try to force the group to formalize as a meeting point. Alternatively, the government might try to force them to split into smaller, more manageable groups. This number, however, depends heavily on the conditions of the locale, attitudes of local government leaders, the local RAB, etc.

Huamei's "Legal and Open" Approach to Social Welfare

16. (SBU) Huamei is jointly registered as a "Non-Profit Organization" (NPO) under both the Labor and Civil Affairs Bureaus. "Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)" have an uncertain legal status and are hard to register, so many organizations like Huamei register as NPOs or as businesses. Cai firmly believes that, through cooperation with the

government, Christianity will spread more effectively in China. Huamei seeks to be a "Christian organization that is not a church," and ties its success to two factors:

A) Emphasis on being "Legal and Open":

During our meeting, Cai repeatedly referred to Huamei's emphasis on "operating within Chinese law." In line with this philosophy, Huamei seeks to formalize as many house churches as possible. Drawing on Cai's reputation and strong relationship with the China Christian Council, Huamei remains one of a few faith-based organizations allowed to operate in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake. (Note: In addition to Huamei, some other FBOs we know of that are active in post-quake recovery efforts include Amity, and the Taiwan-based Buddhist organization Tzu Chi. These organizations tend to de-emphasize their religious nature, instead focusing on the earthquake relief effort, allowing them to operate with minimal government interference. End Note.)

B) Aligning Government Goals and Huamei's Social Welfare Work:

Much of Huamei's work focuses on poverty alleviation, educational programs, and public health in the poorest prefectures of Sichuan. Cai believes that the Chinese government understands that faith-based organizations can promote social stability, and is becoming more accepting of religion. While acknowledging that working with the government can be difficult, he was generally optimistic about his strategy of cooperation and working within the framework of Chinese law.

17. (SBU) Comment: While other church groups agree that faith-based and other NPOs have been effective in providing social services, not all share Cai's optimistic outlook on the prospects for cooperation between the government and faith-based groups in providing social services. In a meeting with Beijing Poloff, Dr. Chan Kim-Kwong of the Hong Kong Christian Council stated that the current strategy of "contracting" out social services to NPOs will face pressure from the government in the long-run. Chan argued that under the current system, less effective government departments will be obviated by NPOs, threatening the government's own credibility and weakening its control. For now, the government seems content with its current strategy of outsourcing social services to non-government groups. However, how this will play out in the long-run is

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uncertain. End Comment.

18. (SBU) Huamei's emphasis is on serving poor prefectures through educational and medical projects. Huamei currently provides tuition assistance of about 50,000 RMB per student per year to 10 students in Sichuan. These scholarships are only available to non-Christian students who demonstrate financial need. As a stipulation, students must participate in volunteer projects and receive their scholarship money through participating local churches. "While there is no expectation the students will become Christians, many have since become believers," he said. (Comment: In the PRC, proselytizing outside churches/religious venues is highly restricted. It appears Huamei is using these scholarships to double as a recruitment tool for the local churches. End Comment.) In Yunhe prefecture, Huamei has an ongoing project with a primary school there to provide book bags and computers to its students. Throughout Sichuan, Huamei also stresses improving literacy among the elderly so they can pass on their reading skills to their grandchildren.

¶9. (SBU) In terms of medical projects, Huamei has established a series of clinics in Sichuan's poorest areas. In Wuzhou, Dazhou, and Yinong prefectures, Huamei has already successfully established full clinics, and provides medical professionals to staff them. They are currently establishing a clinic in Bazhong, Sichuan's poorest prefecture, with plans to open new clinics elsewhere. Huamei also supports smaller churches which establish "medicine rooms" for sick members of their community.

Christian Demographics: Largely Still Poor, Elderly, and Female

¶10. (SBU) Cai said that most Christians in Sichuan and China at large are disproportionately poor, elderly, sick, uneducated, and/or female. In urban areas, there is a stronger presence of young professionals, but they tend to congregate in unofficial and unregistered house churches. Many young professionals first start practicing religion in informal groups in college; some become members of churches after graduation. Many formal churches have started holding special evening ceremonies for young professionals in an effort to attract more members. Party members are still discouraged from having any religion; however many quietly pursue their beliefs. Cai gave the example of a judge from an outlying prefecture in Sichuan who drove several hours to Chengdu to be baptized, presumably to avoid members of her community from knowing her Christian identity.

Sichuan Theological Seminary Struggling to Keep Pace with Demand

¶11. (SBU) The Sichuan Theological Seminary (STS) was reopened in 1984 after having been closed during the Cultural Revolution. According to Cai, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, interest in religion revived and demand for theological training for pastors and lay leaders surged throughout southwest China. STS currently offers two and four-year degrees, with a total enrollment of 75 students. The seminary plans to expand since its enrollment is now limited by classroom space. The STS, a regional seminary, serves Protestants in Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Yunnan and Guizhou also have their own provincial-level seminaries, and Chongqing has a training center, but not yet a seminary. The STS supports these provincial level institutions through resource and training support. In Yunnan especially, there is a high demand for lay leader training. About 20 such lay leader training centers have been established in Yunnan, compared with only two in Sichuan.

Future of Huamei

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¶12. (SBU) Despite interest from other provinces to establish branches of Huamei, Cai aims to keep his focus on Sichuan, where he has established relationships with the Christian community. He has declined invitations to establish branches of Huamei in Guangxi, Zhejiang, and Guizhou. He hopes like-minded individuals in those provinces will establish organizations similar to Huamei in their own provinces. He hopes to split

Huamei into two organizations, one as the existing NPO, and the other as a "public donations foundation" (gongmu jijin), which would have important tax benefits. Under the current NPO rules, Huamei is charged a three percent tax on all revenue in their operations. While he is hopeful for such a change, the 4 million RMB capital requirement for such a structure is a formidable challenge.

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